

Speech by Commissioner Gwendolyn L. Harris
Prudential Foundation's Children's Symposium
March 4, 2003

Thank you for such a warm and welcoming introduction.

I am energized by the turn-out today.

I am hopeful about the prospect of what needs to happen here today.

Because, today, Ladies and gentleman, we need to start a movement.

That's right. We need to start a movement for children.

We need to because we must....

We need to because it is long past time....

We need to because we are losing another generation of children

We need to because we are the richest nation in the world
but far too many of our children are starving, literally -- starving for safety --
starving for nurturance.

They are: home alone; beaten; bruised; neglected; lost to parents on drugs;
lost to parents who can't parent, and lost to parents who have given up on
themselves and therefore have nothing left

to give their children.

In this, the land of plenty, they are impoverished, financially, emotionally
and spiritually -- some of our children lead lives so degrading, so devoid of
love, so devoid of hope, it astounds us, it amazes us, it disgusts us, it
overwhelms us.

We turn our heads. We try not to face it. We say... we can't save the world; it's just too much... It's just too overwhelming... It's just too hard and too complicated... Let government deal with it.

Well it is hard. It is complicated and there are days when it is going to be overwhelming. But you do not want to leave it to government alone – and I say that as government.

We must do it.

We must start of movement for our children.

We must do it for Faheem Williams, and the other children from this community who have died from abuse or neglect.

I would venture to guess no one in this room today ever met Faheem.

I didn't know him... But I have and will expend every fiber of my being -- while I am in a position to do so -- to give meaning to his death.

The details Faheem's short life and violent death are old news now.

Faheem was just seven years old.

We all know by now that his family was known to the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services.

We know that there had been 11 allegations of abuse levied against his mother at various points over the course of the last decade.

We now know that DYFS closed this case, although there was an outstanding allegation of abuse that had not been fully investigated.

An allegation, it now appears, that may have been true.

How tragic.

What a missed opportunity for all of us.

What if we had tried harder to find those children following that last allegation, instead of closing the case.

What if we had laid eyes on those children. Would we have seen scars? Would we have recognized fear, pain, or anguish in the children's faces -- anything -- or the utter absence of joy?

We'll never know.

What we do know is that we need to make changes in the systems that are supposed to protect children in this state. So that, if given the opportunity, we will make the right decisions for children whose lives we touch.

And when I say systems, I mean not just governmental systems or the child protection system -- DYFS -- because changing them

as challenging as it will be

may be the easiest part.

No, I am speaking also of the other systems -- governmental and nongovernmental, formal and informal - that touch the lives of children and shape the destiny of troubled families.

Our community systems include our neighbors, the mail carrier, the Sunday school teacher, the owner of the corner store and the crossing guard.

We need to enlist them to start a movement for our children.

We need to do it for Tasha and Destiny who were aged six and eight when they died at home alone in a fire.

How can we help keep children safe?

How can we help keep children nourished -- emotionally, physically, and spiritually?

I have a plan, Ladies and Gentleman, to help government do a better job protecting kids.

But it will be for naught without what we must do here today: start a movement to protect our children, to care for our children.

A movement for children.

Faheem Williams can serve as a catalyst for the movement.

As the head of the agency that touched the lives of the Williams children but was unable to save him from his horrendous fate, I am willing to say that we failed this family.

But we weren't alone.

Conversely, we aren't going to "fix" the systems that are supposed to nourish and support children alone.

I told 3 legislative committees two weeks ago how state government would begin to improve child protective services in New Jersey:

Our plan calls for the addition of 273 more staff to the Division of Youth and Family Services, so that there are more supervisors, and more case aides to help caseworkers do their jobs, more phones, more cars, and more and better computers.

But history has shown that just adding money to the DYFS budget – even hiring more staff, isn't going to advance long-term and meaningful change in the state's child protective system.

No, it will take more.

The Department of Human Services' plan will focus on three key areas:

(1) Decision-making – Child protective workers make Job-like decisions every day. Should a child be removed from the home. What happens to his or her siblings? Is Mom adequately complying with drug treatment? Is she high? Is she sober? Should she get her kids back?

80% of our direct service staff have less than 5 years on the job. They need more help with decision making because they don't have the savvy that experience brings.

I propose giving caseworkers more tools, literally, by purchasing more equipment. I also propose giving them more supervisory support, more training, more complete information as well as a structured decision making.

(2) Accountability, is also critical especially within the supervising ranks. We are developing measures to hold upper level supervisors and managers accountable for the decisions their staff makes.

We will review case performance district office by district office to ensure quality work; we will improve our information technology system to enhance supervisor's and manager's ability to track outcomes for families and then we will hold management staff accountable for those outcomes.

Finally, (3) we must develop better Communication and Coordination across governmental units. We will start within the department, by pulling most all children's services together under a single Special Deputy Commissioner, Colleen Maguire.

Some of you may know Colleen, she started as a DYFS caseworker and worked her way up through the ranks. She has worked at the department level in the past, in operations support and has been working as a human services consultant for the last eight years.

I am so happy to have Colleen on board because she is a passionate and highly committed advocate for children. She has a single focus: to make services better for children. And she is steadfast in her commitment to get that done.

One of Colleen's primary tasks right now is putting together a plan to transform DYFS into another division dedicated solely to child protection, foster care and adoption – we will call that Division, the Division of Child Protection and Permanency.

She will also develop a blue print to organize most if not all of the child specific services in the Department of Human Services in a manner that achieves a clear child welfare focus within the Department.

So, we are getting our house in order.

But we know that will not be enough.

Government at every level can do better and can do more.

Fact is because we all have room to grow.

That is the only way we can provide meaning to the death of little Tasheer

who was born on March 17th exposed to barbiturates and who died one month later on April 14th of last year –dehydrated.

Home from the hospital for just a few short weeks, Tasheer failed to receive the nourishment and medical care he needed.

We all need to be more aware.

We all must be more vigilant and more active in our advocacy for children.

We must view it as what it is. Not just a problem for DYFS but for all of us, every man, woman and child in this state.

Law enforcement and court officials must make it their business to ensure that children are cared for when a parent is locked up. We are working with the Attorney General and the Administrative Office of the Courts to improve our efforts to accomplish this.

Schools must raise a red flag when a child doesn't attend school for prolonged periods of time or withdraws unexpectedly, especially after a referral of child abuse or neglect is made by the school. We are working with the Department of Education to improve our efforts to accomplish this.

The professionals –clinicians, medical personnel and psychologists -- who advise the courts and the child welfare system about the well being of children and the viability of families, must understand the factors – such as substance abuse and domestic violence -- that contribute to child maltreatment.

Those of us schooled in these helping professions should have more than a passing knowledge of the dynamics of these critical issues which permeate our society and jeopardize our children's safety, nonetheless, the dynamics of substance abuse or domestic violence are not generally required as core content curricula in the helping professions or by state licensing entities. We must work with institutions of higher education and state licensing authorities to address this.

Like I said, we all have room to grow.

So let's take a look at the task before us. Let's understand why we need a movement to keep our children safe.

Over the last five years in New Jersey, 123 children are said to have died due to abuse or neglect. Half of those children were less than one year old.

Let's look at this category of children -- babies -- and I would suggest that we need to look at all other categories of children within this cohort of 123 that we can cogitate or permutate. But for today's exercise, let's start with the babies.

If 62 of these dead children were less than age one year – who should have, could have, would have, come in contact with these children and/or their parents?

DYFS – maybe depending upon the family's history of abuse or neglect.

County Welfare – for cash assistance and Food Stamps, maybe, depending upon the family's income.

Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies – maybe, if the family was aware of or outreached to be provided the service.

WIC – maybe, depending upon the family's income and their being aware of or outreached to be provided the service.

Child Support collection through probation, maybe if such support were due from a non-custodial parent.

Family care (Medicaid) – maybe, once again depending upon the family's income and their being aware of or outreached to be provided the service.

Who, besides these governmental agencies should have, could have, would have, come in contact with these 62 children and/or their parents?

Our nongovernmental or nonprofit partners...

Child care – maybe, if the family took advantage of formalized child care.

Pediatricians or a community health clinic – maybe, if the mother received prenatal care and/or kept the child up to date with well baby medical care.

An early intervention program for special needs children – maybe, once again probably only if specifically referred unless the parent was so aware and so motivated to seek this service out.

Mental health agency, Substance abuse treatment, or general family service agency – maybe...

Food pantry, maybe....

School – maybe, if there were older school age siblings

Recreation center – maybe...

Church, -

Let's consider

that some combination of these governmental and non-governmental agencies did see these children.

How many of them looked beyond the presenting issue to discern a problem that required further attention that may have saved one of these 62 children?

How many of them knew what to look for?

I have already mentioned that it has come to my attention that a clinician can complete their formal training and become licensed as one of the helping

professions in New Jersey without specific understanding of child abuse, domestic violence or substance abuse. Given the co-occurrence of these conditions, this is a significant gap...but back to our 62 children.

How many of the agencies would have understood it to be their duty to follow up on their observations. I am not talking about reporting child abuse or neglect here. I am talking about recognizing and addressing when a child is at risk of maltreatment and then feeling compelled to do something about it.

With all of these potential points of contact, we still missed these 62 children. We still missed little Marco who was born December 4, 2000 and died January 2001 with a lacerated liver and old as well as new rib fractures – how does a one month old baby have old fractures?

This is why we need a movement for our children.

This is why it is going to take more than just government even with the help of non profits and charitable organizations to keep children safe.

I'm talking about:

The next-door neighbor
The clerk in the local Bodega
The lady who runs the laundromat
The local community activist
The neighborhood do-gooder
The local business owner

They all... we all... need to understand that many of our children are in crisis, many of our families are in crisis.

They—we--need to know that we can make a difference in the life of a child.

They—we--need to consider it our responsibility as well as that of government.

This, Ladies and Gentleman, will take some fresh thinking.

I would propose that we must create a new paradigm for children and their families and that it must be broadbased and inclusive.

But to do this, those of us who deliver services are going to need to do something very difficult.

We are going to have to do things differently. We are going to have to think about things differently.

We are going to need to be flexible – something at which government is notoriously poor.

We are going to need to be creative.

We must think in terms of and facilitate a broad community response, if we are to truly start a movement for our children.

It is going to take an unflagging and energetic commitment to seeing children as our number one priority.

We owe it to Isaiah who was born on August 9 2000 and died on March 4, 2001 of new and old rib fractures, a bleeding abdomen, a lacerated liver and a ruptured spleen.

Everybody involved in this movement must bring something to the table.

Today, Prudential has stimulated an important discussion.

This is good.

I would further challenge our corporate citizens to truly make children a priority.

And

I challenge the not-for-profit community to step up and be counted.

We need the health care community to step up and be counted.

We need the faith-based community to step up and be counted.

We need the educational community to step up and be counted.

We need helping professions of all types to step up and be counted.

We need neighbors and baby sitters and cousins to step up and be counted.

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I understand that you all will be discussing ways that everyone can do their part for children, to facilitate this movement, over lunch.

I look forward to hearing your ideas and participating – as much as I can – in the implementation of those ideas.

I am eager to hear from Ceil Zalkind, who represents this state's premiere child advocacy organization.

I look forward to the sage advice of our keynote speaker this afternoon.

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In closing, I want to share with you an old African proverb that speaks volumes to me: "The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people."

I challenge you to think about what this means for our children: The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people.

The more I think about this proverb, the clearer it becomes to me.
The ruin of a nation... the demise of a people...begins at home.

In the American family, we need to value our children.

We need to protect our children.

We need to put our children first, for they are our future.

They are us.

But today babies are dying in their own homes and at the hand of those who should be protecting them.

I do not mean to be harsh, but I fear for the future of this country, because I fear we do not adequately value the present for our children.

As I have said, Government is good. I'm obviously a great believer in the power of government to change peoples' lives for the better.

I've seen it happen and I have made it my life's work.

Government can do a lot and we do keep some children safe, some children fed and some families whole each and every day.

But government can't do it all.

We all must be prepared to teach and to love – and not just our own children but also our neighbor's child. We can't just save our own child; we have to save the child across town too, because their worlds are inextricably intertwined. And we may be their last or only hope.

When I grew up I was encompassed by a triangle of love, as I'm sure most of you were. That triangle was comprised of home, church, and school. This is what lifted my peers and caught us when we fell.

Today

points of that triangle are weakened. So in our commitment to rebuild the family, we must require our churches, community groups, civic associations, corporations and foundations to play an active role in saving our young.

We need a movement for our children.

Milestones in our history are proof that when like-minded people commit to achieve a particular task they are usually successful in bringing about change.

Every movement needs a catalyst.

I offer the name of Faheem Williams.

Unfortunately, I can offer some others as well.

I can offer the names of:

Tasha

Destiny

Tasheer

Marco

Isaiah

Nakayah

Kushann

Brian

Baby Boy Morris

And

Josette

These children all lived and died in Essex County.

Think about that for a minute.

And then, let's all resolve to do all we can.

Let's do our very best.

Let's wrap our arms around our children, protect them, nurture them – and lift them up.

Let's start a movement for our children.

Thank you

